



Cultural labor and the defetishization of environments: connecting ethnographies of tourism in Venezuela and Chile

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Abstract

This paper compares the development of the tourism industry in two different Latin American locations: a municipality of Chile’s Araucanía and Venezuela’s Gran Sabana. In both locations, part of the indigenous population shows interest in the development of this industry, which presents potential as a source of locally generated income. This comparison focuses on examining how property rights and relations shape and are reshaped by the expansion of tourist activities in these locations, shedding light on two additional questions: first, the socioeconomic conditions that help explain the increasing participation of the indigenous population in the expansion of tourism in these regions; second, a cultural phenomenon that this expansion stimulates: the circulation of discursive representations of local environments as permanently inscribed with a particular form of collective labor. This paper will conceptualize this labor as “cultural labor” and, drawing from theorizations of the fetishism of commodities, will argue that the widespread appeals to this labor constitute a (paradoxical) form of discursive defetishization that is fostered by the logic of the tourist industry. This form of defetishization discursively subverts the principle of concealment that pervades commodity fetishism as theorized by Marx, but it is nonetheless a functional part of a social process that reinscribes and rearticulates capital as a social relation among the populations of these regions.

Keywords Cultural labor · Tourism · Commodity fetishism · Mapuche · Pemon · Venezuela · Chile

Jane had proved to be a good trekker. We had already walked a fair bit during that 1-day tour in Curarrehue, including up steep trails leading to one of the tour highlights. However, in the final leg of the tour, Jane struggled. It was only a short, easy

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trek to a secluded waterfall, but halfway through, we came across a barbed wire fence blocking our way. Neither the guide nor anyone else in the tour company had mentioned it, but we had to overcome the fence to reach our destination. The twisting of bodies in avoidance of the wires was tricky for everyone but particularly for Jane, who was the eldest of the group (nearing her seventies).¹ When her turn came, everyone else rushed to pull the wires up and down, trying to widen the gap for her to go through. Jane was clearly discomforted by the fence but probably as much by the awkward expressions of tension she found around her. As soon as she overcame the fence, she dropped a kind but loud “I’m just fine!”²

This episode illustrates a characteristic of tourist tours in this area of the Araucanía Region (southern Chile). Walking by or crossing fences is a normalized element of those tours, and, to an extent, it is an unpredictable event, too, even for local guides. In another tour I completed, the guide, a local Mapuche man, was surprised to find wired fences blocking the forest trail we were following. To facilitate our passing, he had to detach two of the wires from their supporting stakes, reattaching them as soon as we all were on the other side. As we waited for turns to go through, the guide explained that this track was clear the last time he had been there, a couple of months earlier.

In this paper, I undertake a comparison of this and other characteristics of the tourist industry in this part of Chile with tourism in the municipality of Gran Sabana (southern Venezuela). In this latter region, where fences were a rarity until very recently, they are also emerging as central to the development of tourist activities, as more broadly a process of land enclosure (Angosto-Ferrández 2016; 2020). Against this backdrop, my comparison examines how property rights and relations shape and are reshaped by the expansion of the tourist industry in these locations, shedding light on two additional questions: first, the socioeconomic conditions that help explain the increasing participation of the indigenous population in the expansion of tourism in these regions; second, the emergence and circulation of discursive representations of local environments as permanently inscribed with a particular form of collective labor. Agents involved in the industry make frequent appeals to this type of labor in their interactions with visitors, and I will approach this as a cultural phenomenon stimulated by the reorganization of capital as a social relation in these locations.

I will conceptualize this labor as “cultural labor” and, drawing from theorizations of the fetishism of commodities, I will argue that the widespread appeals to this labor can be explained as a paradoxical form of discursive defetishization that is fostered by the logics of the tourist industry. This form of defetishization discursively subverts the principle of concealment that pervades commodity fetishism as theorized by Marx, but

¹ We were seven in the touring party. Jane was traveling with two other female friends, all of them neighbors in a cohousing project in Southern California. The other members of the party were a female tour operator also from California, who was revisiting the area as she prepared future business opportunities; a young Uruguayan woman working in hospitality during the summer season in nearby Villarica, hired that day to provide translation services (Spanish/English); the tour guide, who was a young Mapuche man from a local community; and myself, a Spanish researcher based in Australia.

² All names are pseudonyms.

it is nonetheless a functional part of a social process that (re)inscribes and rearticulates class-based differentiation among the populations of these regions.

My comparison is grounded in field research. I have conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Gran Sabana since 2003, part of it examining the impact of the tourism economy in the transformation of property relations. Field research in 2011 and 2015 included participation in tours to main regional attractions (the so-called Angel Falls and Mount Roraima), complementing ethnographic data obtained in previous visits to other touristic sites and to indigenous communities growingly involved in tourism. My research in the Araucanía started with exploratory visits in 2012 and 2015 (1 and 4 weeks, respectively), followed by 3 months of focused fieldwork in 2018 while based in Villarrica. Fieldwork activities included participation in guided tours in Curarrehue and neighboring *comunas*, as well as visits to various other towns and tourist attractions of the region such as hot springs and equestrian centers.

I additionally draw from a combination of primary data sources (e.g., national census results and other statistical material) and secondary literature for the analysis of the contextual conditions within which tourism develops in both regions.

The paper is structured in five sections. The first section situates this study in relation to two debates that specialized literature generally addresses through separate theoretical streams. One debate is on the socioeconomic potential and impacts of pro-poor and community tourism, which are the business models through which local and international agents explicitly pitch tourist ventures in the locations I compare. The other debate spins around landownership rights and dispossession in indigenous territories and the ways tourist projects might affect them. I bring these two different streams of analysis into dialogue, thus shedding light on impacts of tourist developments that are otherwise overlooked (be it by the lack of interest in class dynamics and intra-community differentiation that debates on community tourism convey, or by the lack of attention to forms of enclosure “from below” (e.g., Dereck, Hirsh, and Li 2013: 14) that often characterizes the literature examining relations between tourist projects and processes of dispossession.

The second section demarcates the grounds of my comparison of tourism in the municipalities of Curarrehue (Chile) and Gran Sabana (Venezuela), highlighting socioeconomic conditions that make potential participation in tourism appealing for shares of the indigenous population. The third section explores the land property rights and relations that condition the activity of local agents involved in tourism (particularly the indigenous population). The fourth section outlines my conceptualization of cultural labor in the context of the expansion of the tourist industry in these two regions. The final section provides some additional discussion on the role that discursive appeals to cultural labor play in these contexts.

Tourism, poverty, and property relations

Paralleling the growth of the tourism industry across the world, research on tourism increased substantially in recent decades. A part of this research explores the potential of pro-poor tourism in economically depressed regions, where other productive

activities are in decline or insufficient for the population to prevent poverty (Ashley, Roe, and Goodwin 2001; Torres and Momsen 2004). Adding to its potential for poverty alleviation, tourism is being examined as an activity that, when undertaken in accord with some model prescriptions of community tourism and ecotourism, may benefit local communities by strengthening their cultural sovereignty and by contributing to protecting threatened built and natural environments (e.g., Gao and Wu 2017; Scheyvens 1999; Krystal 2000; Boley and Green 2016). These have become the reference models for most people developing tourism ventures in Curarrehue and Gran Sabana.

Political and economic elites have been active promoters of these forms of tourism in different parts of the world, providing legislative, institutional, and financial frames of support for their development and consolidation (Velasco 2016; Akama 2002; Jeffries 2001). Some supranational institutions and large donors, ranging from UNESCO to the World Bank to international NGOs, have included these models of tourism in support of their development agendas, too, underscoring the global prominence this activity has gained as a potential engine of socioeconomic development (Chok, Macbeth, and Warren 2007; Houque, Lovelock, and Carr 2020).

These streams of research and advocacy do not preclude critical takes on those models of tourism. A frequent criticism spins around the ways in which the category “community” is defined and articulated in some streams of research as an operational unit of sociological analysis (Harrison 2008; Salazar 2012). This refers to usages of the category community that prevent researchers from grasping the implications of intra-community difference in the shaping of social process, blurring individually or collectively differentiated situations within a particular social structure. This very same issue resonates in predominant usages given to the concept of poverty in pro-poor tourism literature (Gascón, 2015). In this literature, poverty is generally conceptualized in absolute terms in relation to a geographically demarcated human collective (e.g., a community, a region, a nation). Accordingly, as soon as the net income of that human collective increases, poverty is considered to decrease – regardless of the intragroup distribution of that net income. Studies of tourism that articulate conceptualizations of community as a homogeneous sociological unit reinforce this lack of concern with the theoretical and practical implications of intra-community difference.

Critics have also argued that the promotion of pro-poor tourism and ecotourism has become an avenue for the reproduction of neoliberal governance (e.g., Coria and Calfucura 2012; Schilcher 2007). They suggest that, as any other calls for diversification of economic activities that are not accompanied by a transformation of the structural factors that condition the implementation of those activities, the promotion of these tourism models in economically deprived regions tends to intensify processes of unequal accumulation in those regions, exacerbating the concentration of wealth and assets in segments of the population. In rural areas in particular, these processes tend to intensify the precariousness of peasants or small landholders who are unable to “diversify” due to structural factors (Kay 2007; Garin and Quinteros, 2020).

A stream within this critical research corpus specifically examines tourism in relation to ownership rights and processes of dispossession. For instance, research

on tourism tailored as a form of environmental conservation shows how the intertwining of ideals of sustainable economic growth and environmental protection turns tourism into a market-driven mechanism through which capital holders and economic elites deprive local populations of access to land and other resources (e.g., Devine and Ojeda 2017; Büscher 2009; Kelly 2011). Furthermore, tourist projects can generate the effects of a land grab without necessarily transforming property rights, as part of politically sanctioned processes that recast the conditions through which different social groups can use and benefit economically from areas that attract tourists. For instance, researchers have shown how large firms benefit financially from protected areas that remain under public ownership, doing so thanks to politically legalized mechanisms that range from the management of concessions for ecotourism to the participation in carbon trading schemes (e.g., Holmes 2014; Ojeda 2012; Igoe 2007).

This line of research reveals and characterizes the power imbalances that the development of certain tourist ventures reproduce, with corporations and propertied members of dominant classes as main beneficiaries. However, it falls short of explaining why, despite those imbalances, and beyond the perspectives of power holders and pro-poor tourism advocating experts, many people in a variety of economically depressed regions demonstrate an interest in participating actively in the tourism industry – on occasion succeeding in doing so. To explain this phenomenon, in the next two sections, I will shed light on the structural conditions that shape people's interest (and their capacity to participate) in the tourism industry in two different Latin American regions. But I will do so in tandem with an exploration of how, when locals succeed in finding a room to participate in this industry, they become active agents in recasting social formations in the peripheral regions of the world system they occupy. The pivotal element in this process is the reconfiguration of property relations, though, as I will show, the direction of that reconfiguration varies substantially, depending on the structural factors that condition it. Local entrepreneurs in the Araucanía foster social transformations that involve a partial and selective undoing of the historical process of land enclosures and commodification that had deprived them and their ancestry of effective property rights over their territory. In contrast, in Gran Sabana, where the local Pemon have had *de facto* access to abundant land treated as a common pool resource, locals involved in tourism generate transformations that include “intimate exclusions” or “enclosures from below” (e.g., Xu 2018; Alkhalili 2017), that is: forms of land grabbing that are articulated by (some) members of subaltern classes at the expense of other members of those classes.

Comparison grounds

Tourism had been an important economic activity for decades both in Venezuela's Gran Sabana and in Chile's Araucanía, but the prominence of this activity increased markedly in recent years. Gran Sabana is the most renowned tourist area in Bolívar state, where the number of visitors increased abruptly in the mid-2000s: a 235.06% between 2005 and 2006, with a further 43.44% increase the following year (Plan

de Desarrollo del Estado Bolívar 2013). In the Araucanía, the number of visitors also registered substantial increases during that period (de la Maza, 2016: 84–86). Between 2003 and 2008, the contributions to GDP of the economic sectors most directly related to tourist activities (“commerce, restaurants, and hotels” and “transport and communications”) grew 30% (Gobierno Regional de la Araucanía 2010), setting the background to a trend of growth that has only stopped recently. During this period, the Chilean government became an active promoter of tourism as an engine of economic development in the country, through various schemes (de la Maza 2018: 1–3). I focus my analysis in these scenarios of growth, though the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have obviously altered those trends both in Chile and Venezuela, in the latter case intensifying the protracted economic recession that strikes the country since 2015 and US-led sanctions on the country severely aggravate (Weisbrot and Sachs 2019). In 2019, well before the pandemic took off, the main association of tourist service providers in Bolívar state was already reporting a drop of 80% in visitors to Gran Sabana during the previous year (Briceño and Josette, 2019), in addition to growing precariousness for tourist operators (ranging from difficulties in accessing to fuel to the general deterioration of infrastructure).

Beyond the numbers of visitors, Gran Sabana and the Araucanía share key traits as tourist destinations. Both regions are identified as traditional indigenous territories (Pemon and Mapuche territories, respectively) and are renowned for their natural environments. The tabletop mountains (tepuis) and waterfalls of Gran Sabana and the mountains, lakes, and araucaria forests of the Araucanía are among the most iconic landscapes of their respective countries, recurrently used by the Venezuelan and Chilean national tourist boards for the international promotion of tourism in their respective countries.

The proportion of the indigenous population (fundamentally Pemon) in Gran Sabana municipality is among the highest in Venezuela: 77.67% of the total population in that administrative unit (INE 2011). The majority of the population in Curarrehue is indigenous (Mapuche), too; though there are discrepancies in the data provided by the national census, which registers 50.4% as indigenous (INE Chile 2017) and other sources of statistical data such as the Chilean National Survey of Socioeconomic Characteristics (CASEN by its Spanish acronym), which registers a far higher percentage of the local population as indigenous (see de la Maza, 2014: 357–362 for an analysis of the politics of ethnic categorization in Chilean statistics).

Both municipalities are among the poorest in their respective countries, too. Nearly 50% of households in Gran Sabana were identified in the last Venezuelan census round (INE 2011) as poor (28.2%) or extremely poor (20.7%), and that after the period of remarkable economic growth and expansive redistributive governmental policy of the first decade of the 2000s, underpinned by historical records of expenditure in key social services (Aponte Blank 2010). Furthermore, aggregate census data do not reflect the diversity of conditions of the population in Gran Sabana, where different degrees of integration in market economies generate a clear structural divide among its indigenous communities (Angosto-Ferrández 2013). In a share of these communities all families maintain a capacity to produce a significant part of their food and meet basic subsistence needs with a degree of autonomy from the market economy, a capacity grounded on an indigenous property regime that

grants them access to land and other common pool resources (see next section).³ In some of these communities, no one has permanent salaries or regular access to income except for the schoolteachers and, in some cases, some other publicly funded workers (e.g., community nurses). The level of poverty measured in terms of income in these communities is obviously far higher than the average reflected by the census results.

Curarrehue also ranks among the poorest municipalities in Chile. The Araucanía region is the second poorest region in the country, and Mapuche communities in particular register higher-than-average levels of poverty and weaker results in measurements of the Human Development Index (Párraguez Vergara and Barton 2013: 239–240). A recent economic survey categorized one-third (32.2%) of the Mapuche population in Curarrehue as poor or extremely poor and, for decades, unemployment levels there have also been significantly higher than the national average (Peralta 2017: 171). Small-scale cattle raising, seasonal agricultural labor, and forestry-related activities generate income for a part of the local population, which nevertheless often relies on remittances to complement their household income. In any case, those economic activities and remittances do not guarantee economic security for the local population. By 2006, public subsidies and payments constituted the largest share of the total income for the local population, a factor associated with the limited access that most of this population has to land and other productive assets (Garin and Quinteros 2020: 224, 227; Párraguez Vergara and Barton 2013: 254).

For decades, this background of poverty has pushed people in these two regions, and particularly the indigenous population, to feed intranational flows of economically motivated migration, whether temporarily or permanently. Migration patterns among the Pemon and the Mapuche differ notably, due to the differential degree of access to land and other resources of which they avail in their traditional territories. Among the Mapuche, the pattern of migration to urban areas intensified markedly in the 1960s, after successive waves of land privatization and division had left large shares of the population, and particularly younger generations, without an option to access land (see next section). Among the Pemon, access to land as a common pool resource has been maintained in most communities (see next section), guaranteeing a vital minimum of food production for their population, and to that extent reducing pressures for permanent migration. Nevertheless, temporary economic migrations are widespread in Gran Sabana, too – it is virtually impossible to find families in which some of their members have not traveled at least temporarily outside their communities for wage work.

Whether as temporary migrant laborers or as fully proletarianized indigenous laborers, people from both groups generally meet some comparable conditions, with experiences of labor exploitation and precariousness intensified by racist discrimination and a variety of cultural barriers – on occasion including lack of proficient knowledge of Spanish among migrants (for the case of the Mapuche, see Imilan and Álvarez, 2017; Alvarado Lincopi 2016; Baeza 2015; for the case of the Pemon,

³ For ethnographic descriptions of the economic foundations of a community in this position, see Angosto-Ferrández 2006, 2013, 2016, and 2020.

Angosto-Ferrández 2020: 8–13; for the case of other indigenous peoples in Venezuela such as the Warao, see Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2000: 332–335). These negative experiences contribute to explaining why migration is only pursued in lack of alternatives, and in turn why tourist activities are welcomed by many people in poor indigenous communities as a potential source of the locally generated income and an alternative to proletarianization or temporary labor migrations. Indeed, a common trait in the personal biographies of most of the indigenous workers and tourist business owners I have conversed with during fieldwork in Gran Sabana and the Araucanía is the experience of labor migrations – presented as negative or directly as the cause of life crises.

The process of proletarianization that underpins indigenous migration in these regions is linked to historical mechanisms of land dispossession that in recent decades were accentuated by the establishment of national parks and protected areas. These land management regimes decrease the capacity of local populations to maintain degrees of autonomy from market mechanisms to guarantee subsistence, even when local populations observe some conservationist regulations laxly. The case of Canaima National Park illustrates this case for the Pemón of Gran Sabana. Created in 1962 and expanding over 30,000 km², its management regime affects the territory of most of the indigenous communities in the region, establishing restrictions upon subsistence practices (from hunting to savannah burning). In Curarrehue, three-fourths of the territory are protected areas, including a national park under the management of the National Forest Corporation (CONAF, an agency organically linked to the Ministry of Agriculture) and UNESCO-declared reserves (Huiliñir-Curío 2018: 49). For the local Mapuche, this management regime set restrictions on access to forest resources for noncommercial purposes (from woods for household construction to the collection of medicinal herbs and *pewen*, the edible nut of the *Araucaria* so central to sociocultural reproduction that it informed the denomination of one of the Mapuche subgroups, the Pewenche). In some Mapuche communities, these restrictions have led to organized protests, including the occupation of parts of the reserve by Mapuche protestors. These protests led to the establishment of an agreement between the CONAF and some Mapuche communities for the comanagement of part of the protected areas (CONAF 2008: 46–47). This agreement enables members of these communities to bring cattle into areas of the reserve, as well as to undertake other cultural activities within it.

Property regimes

Shortly after crossing that fence Jane struggled with, we all had to go through another fence before reaching the waterfall. “It is to avoid that cattle run away,” the tour guide confided. We learnt that the waterfall that awaited us was within the ranch of a renowned landowner – we were actually crossing the ranch right then. Neither the guide nor any of the members of his tour operator had requested permission to go through the ranch with tourists. “It is a long time since the owner last visited the place; he rarely comes here,” the guide added. On behalf of the landowner, the ranch was run by a local Mapuche man, a relative of the *lonko* (local authority,

traditionally a local lineage headman) of an adjacent Mapuche community, and an in-law of one of the tour operator associates.

This episode resonates with issues of access to and uses of land that the expansion of the tourist industry brings forth. In the two locations examined in this paper, the local population is concerned with property rights over land that is now also a means for the provision of tourist services – a major focus of productive transformation in both regions, as previously remarked. Yet, this concern is being shaped within different land property regimes, which condition markedly different responses. To consolidate their position as providers of certain tourist services such as scenic tours, the indigenous population in Curarrehue largely depends on a recasting of private property rights that selectively undoes the process of lands enclosures in the region, as the example above illustrates. In contrast, for the indigenous population in Gran Sabana, the expansion of tourism is generating a reconfiguration of property rights that includes enclosures of land and resources previously treated as common pool resources (Angosto-Ferrández 2020). A historical overview of property regimes in these regions contributes to explaining the root of this contrast.

In Chile, the indigenous peoples currently included under the overarching denomination Mapuche preserved control of large shares of their territory during the colonial period. Unable to defeat them militarily, the colonial authorities were obliged to negotiate treaties with these peoples in the seventeenth century, in practice recognizing the latter's political autonomy south of the Bio Bio river (Bengoa 1996: 32–36; Contreras Painemal 2011: 55–81).

The Mapuche still maintained significant control of their territory for decades after Chile's declaration of independence from Spain in 1818. But in the 1860s, the Chilean government, spurred by commercial interests of large agricultural producers in an international context favorable to their exports, redoubled its military efforts to occupy those lands (Clapp 1998: 576). The so-called Occupation of Araucanía (1861–1883), an extended military campaign coordinated by successive Chilean governments, concluded with the defeat of the Mapuche. A government-fostered process of colonist settlement (“Radicación”) ensued, through which colonists were granted possession of lands in the occupied territory while some indigenous communities received collective land titles (“Títulos de Merced”). The Mapuche were only granted formal title over some 5% of the territory they claimed after this military defeat, and in subsequent decades they were still dispossessed of some of this land through a variety of deceitful or overtly violent mechanisms (Bengoa 1996; Alwyn 2002).

In the twentieth century, a succession of legal reforms facilitated that nonindigenous people could acquire land under indigenous collective title through market mechanisms. In 1927, Law 4169 established a Tribunal that oversaw divisions of indigenous “reducciones” and the procedures for sale. Unable to maintain their households with the means that their small plots of land guaranteed, some Mapuche families sold those plots, thus engrossing the ranks of proletarianized farmers in Chile. New legislation in 1930 and 1931 (Law 4802 and Decree 4111, respectively) continued advancing this process, which in parallel contributed to transforming notions and practices of collective ownership even among the

Mapuche who were able to maintain land ownership – the land of “reducciones” transmuted into “private property,” a commodifiable entity.

This background of land dispossession, in tandem with the markedly unequal distribution of land that market mechanisms generated in Chile, was the source of continuous conflict in the region, and gradually it gave rise to the emergence of organized groups demanding land reform. From the 1960s, governments implemented limited scope reforms in response to these demands, firmly opposed by landed elites. In the 1970s, Allende’s short-lived government (1970–1973) widened the scope of those reforms, including collective management titles for farmland that benefitted some Mapuche communities (Correa, Molina, and Yáñez 2005; Murray 2002; Azócar et al. 2005). Pinochet’s military coup halted that process in 1973, inaugurating a shift in policy and legislation that facilitated further division of collective land title into privately owned holdings. Decree N° 2568 of 1979 promoted individual usage of land within the collective “Títulos de Merced” held by indigenous communities, reopening the way for market mechanisms to recast property rights over that land. Once again, Mapuche families that were incapable of keeping afloat economically sold their land, which generally went to engross large landholdings. Mapuche-owned land plots became ever smaller as owners divided them among their descendants, further complicating the viability of these plots as agricultural production units.

This process sets the background to the configuration of property relations in Curarrehue’s municipality, where Mapuche landholders only possess small land plots (generally below 5 ha) and where land concentration under large private holdings owned by non-Mapuche Chileans or foreigners abounds.

In contrast, a combination of historical and ecological factors resulted in what de facto has been a relative abundance of land for the Pemon of Gran Sabana, who mostly continued to treat it as a common pool resource until recently (Angosto-Ferrández 2020). In comparative terms, the territory of today’s Venezuela did not attract sustained efforts of colonization from early colonial authorities, for whom it lacked the appeal of abundant manufactured riches or mining prospects. This marginal position within the Spanish colonial system is indexed by the fact that the Captaincy General of Venezuela, the colonial administrative unit that eventually grounded the Venezuelan republic, was only created in 1777 – nearly 3 centuries after the beginning of colonial operations in the region.

When commercial agriculture took off on a larger scale in other parts of Venezuela, geographical and ecological conditions also discouraged colonial enterprises in the southern regions of the Captaincy, where Gran Sabana is located. The soils of this region were disadvantageous in relation to those in the Andean and coastal regions where the cultivation of commercial crops such as coffee and cacao effectively developed (Sanoja Obediente 2011; Roseberry 1983). Gran Sabana was additionally distant from the coast and its large commercial ports, and relatively so from the Orinoco river, too (a natural avenue for commercial routes traversing the country). Gran Sabana’s abundant waterways were not apt for sizable boats and, by land, the Lema mountain range set obstacles to those coming from the growingly populated north of the region.

In the eighteenth century, colonial authorities relied on Catholic religious orders, and specifically on the Capuchin, for the colonization of the northern areas of today's Bolívar state (Donís Ríos 2002). Exploiting indigenous labor, Capuchin missions in the Caroní basin (north from today's Gran Sabana) developed commercially oriented cattle raising and proto-capitalist manufacture with strong productivity, but the wars of independence in Venezuela resulted in the destruction of those productive foci. From the 1820s onward, after republican independence, the landed oligarchy that replaced the political function of the religious orders in the region was incapable of maintaining the productive levels of the previous regime, and so colonization impulses linked to productivity growth in the region stagnated (Sanoja and Vargas 2005; Perera 2006).

Thus, Gran Sabana lands remained largely beyond the direct control of colonists and early republican authorities. Institutionalized state presence in the region was indeed precarious until well into the twentieth century. Only in 1931 was a frontier post, along with a Capuchin mission, established in Santa Elena, today's municipal capital. The Capuchin subsequently founded other mission posts in Kavanayen (1942), Kamarata (1954), and Wonken (1959), acting for decades as subrogate state officials with jurisdictional powers over this territory, in accord with the Law of Missions of 1915 and subsequent agreements with Venezuelan governments (Clarac 2002; Villalón 1985). The Capuchin tried to promote productive transformation in this period, too, fostering cattle raising and surplus-oriented agriculture and providing some wage work to the indigenous population in the vicinity of mission settlements. But the reach of such productive transformation was very limited, and most indigenous communities in the region maintained semi-subsistence economies, managing access to land as a common pool resource.

In parallel, as the oil industry took off in Venezuela in the 1920s, the importance of agricultural production in the country was gradually displaced by oil extractivism and related activities (Tinker Salas 2009; Di John 2009). A growingly dominant commercial bourgeoisie weakened the relative power of landed oligarchies, which contributed to decreasing the stimuli on the expansion of the agricultural capitalist frontier. As a result, colonizing pressures upon indigenous lands and populations appeared temporarily in areas such as Gran Sabana, and more broadly in the Amazon region. During Rafael Caldera's first government (1969–1974), the Committee for the Development of the South (CODESUR) fostered dispossessing accumulation in southern Venezuela (Arvelo-Jiménez, 1990; Perera, 2006), but such projects impacted more on areas of today's Amazonas state and the northwestern part of Bolívar state than in areas like Gran Sabana, where the vast Canaima National Park had been recently created.

These factors contribute to explaining why, despite the lack of formal title, land has *de facto* been abundant for the Pemon of Gran Sabana until recently. Private property titles are indeed a rare exception in the whole region, virtually nonexistent in most of its indigenous communities. Though this region concentrates a variety of overlapping and contradictory state-sanctioned territorial regulation (ranging from conservationist legislation to military administration to indigenous collective title [Martens 2011]), the Pemon have continued to effectively access large shares of their traditional lands, treating them as a common pool resource in accord with the

indigenous land regime. In this regime, neither individuals nor families were able to make permanent ownership claims over demarcated land. The notion of common ancestry underpins the legitimacy of access to land and other local resources by all families in a community, a principle that obviously complicates any demand of permanent private ownership over land, and furthermore in most Pemon communities the level of cognatic concentration of kin is very high to this day. While families gain rights over the land they are cultivating, the swidden agriculture model practiced by the Pemon involves periodic rotation of the cultivations, and thus regular changes in the location of productive gardens. Families maintain preferential rights over land that has been previously cultivated by them or their relatives; the Pemon term *moapöta*, which names an abandoned garden, connotes connections between that land and the family that cultivated it. But this of course does not equate to permanent private property rights over that land and less so rights over cartographically demarcated land. In short, land cannot be accessed via market mechanisms, since private property over this resource has not been instituted.

Tourism in the Araucanía and in Gran Sabana is generating changes in this background of property rights and relations and, as the next section discusses, it is doing so while stimulating a comparable form of cultural production.

Cultural labor, conservation, and the defetishization of nature

As we walked toward Huesquefilo lake, Ángela, a local Mapuche woman who runs her own tourist business and was our guide that day, conversed casually with whoever approached her. Random, distended, friendly chats on topics ranging from raising children to mobile phones to types of bread. However, specific loci of meaning production were identifiable in this chatting when the conversation referred to the place we were trekking through. For example, as we started the walk, Ángela explained that “these forests we are crossing are managed by the CONAF but always with our help;” later on, as we walked past Araucaria trees, she told us about the traditional Mapuche practice of simultaneously collecting and planting Araucaria seeds (*pewen*), explicitly presented as an instance of conservation practice.

This section addresses these comments as instantiations of a cultural phenomenon that is also identifiable around tourist activities in Gran Sabana. Scholars have theorized from different angles the relation between tourism and culture, ranging from poorly aged discussions of how the dynamics of the tourist industry can accelerate “cultural change” in certain parts of the world presented as “backward” (Smith 1989: 9) to critiques of the binary authenticity/inauthenticity as a valid set of categories to conceptualize cultural practice and performance in tourist interactions (Theodossopoulos 2013). However, my approach is different. The cultural phenomenon I refer to is a process of meaning production. I contend that this phenomenon is a response to (and in part a requirement of) the social process articulated through tourism in both regions. As Macip and Zamora Valencia (2012) have shown in relation to tourist projects in the coast of Oaxaca (Mexico), that social process transforms conservation into a “language of contention” through which members of different class fractions maneuver to gain positions of (relative) advantage. The structural

conditions that shape the lives of indigenous populations in Gran Sabana and the Araucanía are indeed comparable in key respects with the conditions experienced by impoverished locals in Oaxaca's coast, who tap into tourism in a scenario of the collapse of the agricultural sector for small landholders and of growing conservationist restrictions on access to fishing and maritime resources. But here I want to draw attention to the processes of meaning production through which local populations in Gran Sabana and the Araucanía demarcate a social position in that field of contention. This is achieved through the generation of discursive representations that feed an overarching argument: the nature-rich territory that tourists are visiting is the product of the practices and knowledge of the indigenous inhabitants of those lands.

In those representations, the environment appears as permanently inscribed with a type of collective labor. Because of the ways in which this labor is discursively signified in spaces of the interface between locals and tourists, it can be conceptualized as cultural labor. This is signified as labor that people perform as members of a human group defined in terms of cultural identity – not as “independent” laborers, not as “professionally skilled” laborers, but as members of a particular ethnic group whose identity shapes the form, function, and meaning of that labor. When Ángela recalled that it is “always with our help” that the CONAF manages the reserve, she was of course referring to the help of the Mapuche people defined as a culturally distinctive group, in parallel appealing to this form of collective labor that guarantees that the reserve remains nature-rich. When referring to the Mapuche practice of planting *Araucaria* seeds (*pewen*), she was nominating another instance of that culturally defined collective labor (of conservation).

Comparable references to this type of collective labor are easily identifiable in spaces of the interface between tourists and Pemon locals involved in the tourist business in Gran Sabana, for instance in comments of Pemon guides on the traditional Pemon practice of savannah burning as a practice of conservation (preventing more devastating fires) or on the sustainable character of traditional agriculture. In both scenarios, these comments feed into overarching representations of natural environments as produced environments, as social spaces that permanently embody a collective person and its labor. Along these lines, the Araucanía embodies the Mapuche such as Gran Sabana embodies the Pemon. These representations of the natural environments that are consumed through tourism thus constitute a form of discursive defetishization.

In his theorization of commodity fetishism, Marx (1990: 163–177) argued that a symptomatic pillar of capitalist ideology is the normalization of understandings of the products of labor (commodities) as entities that are detached from the social relations that underpin them. A principle of concealment sustains this fetishism: the labor that is inscribed in any commodity, and the social relations that shape that labor with historically situated determinations, disappear from a scene in which commodities gain a mystified status as autonomous, agentive entities. Turning upside down that principle of concealment, appeals to cultural labor operate as a discursive mechanism that makes visible (a type of) labor as constitutive of natural environments that are transformed into consumable spaces through tourist ventures. This mechanism of meaning production has the effect of (discursively) preventing that the environments that tourists visit could be objectified in separation from an

ethnically defined group that creates and conserves those environments through collective labor.

In the scenario of competition that tourism generates, this becomes an affirmation of ownership claims in territories over which effective property rights are largely absent (as is the case for the Mapuche of the Araucanía, as previously explained) or endangered in a period of increasing territorial encroachment (as is the case for the Pemon of Gran Sabana [Angosto-Ferrández 2020]). Beyond the expressive and affective dimensions of these forms of meaning production, these are part and parcel of the social process that tourism as an economic activity informs, both driven by competition between economic agents and constrained by the specific conditions and configuration of social forces that these agents experience in specific locations. In that sense, these mechanisms of defetishizing meaning production can be read as a strategy against dispossession through which indigenous peoples try to affirm inalienable ownership rights but simultaneously as a cultural phenomenon that indexes the active participation of these peoples in the expanded reproduction of capital as a social relation. In short, these loci of meaning production constitute a paradoxical form of defetishization.

This form of discursive defetishization succeeds in unconcealing labor as a constitutive element of the environments that tourists consume, yet it does so naturalizing the social relations of capitalist production. This is well illustrated in appeals to cultural labor that transmute into claims of ownership of nature as a commodifiable entity. Mediated by the social transaction in which a tourist service provider is compensated economically by a tourist, comments such as “it is for us a pleasure to share with visitors the energy of our nature” or “we share with you this nature that our grandparents have given us,” which I have registered during field research, instantiate this situation. Through these transactions, nature is transformed into an entity that is owned by proprietors/conservers who become entitled to share it through the rules of the market.

The type of collective labor that appeals to cultural labor unconceal, which is labor conceptually severed from any rooting in a historical field of actually existing property relations, thus ends up mystifying the social relations that give form and function to such labor. Those are nonetheless the relations that determine who benefits from the collective labor that becomes discursively inscribed in environments as socially produced spaces. While the environments consumed by tourists are presented as produced and conserved by the collective labor of the members of a group defined by cultural identity, the market transactions that tourist activities develop depend on the emergence of privatized property rights over that environment. Those who benefit economically from the product of cultural labor are therefore not the laborers themselves, who produce surplus labor that is never compensated. Only those who become “proprietors” of that environment, be it by the rights granted by landownership in the current property regime (and the rent-capture those rights may facilitate in tourist locations) or be it by the generation of productive units that indirectly generate property rights over the products of cultural labor (i.e., by becoming a provider of tourist services through which the environment is shared with tourists), can potentially benefit economically from the product of cultural labor.

Conclusion

Any service provider and landowner who participates in the tourist industry become directly or indirectly dependent on mechanisms of discursive production to gain and maintain a position as a potential rent earner. Harvey (2002) theorized this phenomenon in his examination of the conditions of possibility for monopoly rents, which in most spheres of economic activity, including the tourist industry, can only be realized when economic agents benefit from (and are able to reproduce) the collectively generated symbolic capital that their products (or the destination upon which their rent-capture rests) accumulate. Amidst the growing competition that the expansion of the industry exacerbates, the potential for rent-capture becomes strongly linked to the claims of singularity and uniqueness that a natural or built environment can acquire as a tourist destination. These claims are sustained discursively through streams of meaning production that gain a particular function as a constitutive element of the social process that sustains economic activity. Economic actors become engaged in discursive struggles that aim to set that advantage of a “product” (or a “tourist destination”) over others, and this paper makes a contribution to understanding these struggles by showing how they are articulated by people occupying a marginal position in the peripheries of the world system.

The indigenous population of Curarrehue and Gran Sabana see in the expanding tourism industry a potential opportunity to realize a qualitative transformation in the form in which they participate in market economies. Tourism appears as an activity that can potentially provide locally generated income, thus contributing to preventing labor migrations. In contrast to working for others as (intensely exploited) wage laborers, this industry additionally offers a few people the possibility of becoming business owners or self-employed in their own localities. In a period in which community tourism entrepreneurship has been strongly promoted by public and private agencies as an avenue to generate socioeconomic development, that possibility has opened up even for some people with very limited assets and resources. A variety of government agencies, NGOs, or supranational organizations are implementing schemes through which some access to financing and professional training is granted.

Yet this population also faces structural challenges that complicate their potential participation in the industry. Their struggles are multiple and conditioned by the precarious position from which they attempt to consolidate that participation. On the one hand, the property regime in places like Curarrehue has left the local population with very limited rights to access the land upon which activities like scenic tours can be developed. On the other hand, and even when land is accessible to the indigenous population like is the case in Gran Sabana, the risks of market-driven land dispossession and/or displacement from the tourism business by nonindigenous capital holders with stakes in the business is a continuous threat. Indigenous populations undertake these struggles lacking capital (in its monetary form), so appeals to cultural labor acquire a key role in these scenarios.

For the indigenous population involved in tourism, the mechanism of discursive defetishization of the environment (i.e., its conceptualization a social product

permanently inscribed with an ethnically demarcated form of collective labor) plays two crucial functions beyond the singularization of that environment as a tourist destination: it becomes a tool to assert an irreplaceable position in the struggle for a position within the industry and also a discursive strategy that contributes to contest further land dispossession – the association of land with a collective body that has created and conserves it gains that social function in this scenario. Yet, these defetishizing discursive mechanisms are nonetheless part and parcel of a process of expansion of capitalist relations in peripheral areas of the world system. They index the strength with which processes of cultural production become inextricably tied to social processes totalized by the logics of capital as a social relation, rather than a mark of resistance to these logics.

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